Indiana FIELD OFFICE TECHNICAL GUIDE

Section III Conservation Management Systems

Guidance Documents

Conservation Planning Process

Conservation planning is a natural resource problem solving and management process. The process integrates economic, social, and ecological considerations to meet private and public needs. This approach, which emphasizes desired future conditions, helps improve natural resource management, minimize conflict, and address problems and opportunities.

The planning process used by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is based on the premise that clients will make and implement sound decisions if they understand their resources, natural resource problems and opportunities, and the effects of their decisions.

The planning process used by NRCS is a three-phase, nine step process. Although the nine steps are shown in sequence, the process is very dynamic. The process could start with any of the first three steps or even step nine. Cycling back to previous steps is often necessary.

Phase I - Collect and Analysis

1. **Identify Problems and Opportunities**
2. **Determine Objectives**
3. **Inventory Resources**
4. **Analyze Resource Data**

Phase II - Decision Support

5. **Formulate Alternatives**
6. **Evaluate Alternatives**
7. **Make Decisions**

Phase III - Application and Evaluation

8. **Implement the Plan**
9. **Evaluate the Plan**

Problem Checklist

One of the first steps in formulating a RMS is to identify all resource problems through a careful and thorough inventory of the planning area. The smallest

planning area on which a RMS plan is developed is the Conservation Management Unit (CMU).

Site Specific Practice Effects Worksheet

After the resource problems for the Planning area have been identified they are listed as column headings across the top of the Site Specific Practice Effects Worksheet (SSPEW). Conservation practices are then selected that address the landuser objectives and have a high potential of solving one or more of the identified resource problems. The selected practices are listed as row headings down the left-hand side of the Site Specific Practice Effects Worksheet.

Using the information on the Conservation Practices Physical Effects (CPPE) matrix in Section V-A-1 as a guide, the site-specific effects are entered in the appropriate block on the SSPEW (where the resource problem column intersects with the conservation practice row). These effects are displayed using a plus (+) if the practice has a positive impact or a minus (-) if the practice as a negative impact. The plus or minus is further modified by adding slight, moderate or significant.

The effects shown on the CPPE are based on the assumption that the practice being evaluated is not presently applied and that when they are applied they will be applied as part of a Resource Management System and according to NRCS standards and specifications contained in FOTG Section IV. The effects are often displayed as a range and will generally need to be refined to site-specific effects to address the problems in the planning area where technical assistance is being provided.

Resource Management Systems Options Worksheet

Resource Management System options. Selecting an acceptable combination of practices is a technical skill that requires ingenuity and warrants a great deal of attention. Some practices may be needed to offset negative or limiting features of other practices.

Once combinations of conservation practices have been developed that meet the quality criteria for each of the identified resources affected, they become viable RMS options.

The primary reason for displaying the pluses and minuses in the RMS Options Worksheet is to indicate differences in effects of the options. For instance, while all the options may meet the minimum quality criteria, one option may be very strong in the soil resource and not quite as strong in one or more of the other resources. In contrast, another option may be very strong in the water and animal resources and not quite as strong in the soil resource. Therefore, land users can better understand the benefits of all the options so they can select the one that best meets their objectives.

Although the worksheets are primarily designed for training and formulation of guidance documents, they can also be used as planning tools when complex situations are encountered in the field. They can also document physical effects of specifically planned RMSs to show the decisionmaker or others what impacts can be anticipated.

Conservation Effects for Decision Making

After the RMS options have been developed the Conservation Effects for Decisionmaking (CED) process may be followed if the land user needs additional information to reach a decision. This technical tool can provide a powerful technique to plan, evaluate and select RMSs. The effects concept can be used to develop RMS options for specific fields, conservation management units (CMU's) or other planning areas. It can also be used to explain resource problems and potential solutions to the decisionmaker and to others. It is simply a tool to assist the planning process.

Progressive Plans -

When the land user can not meet the requirements of a RMS Plan, the planner may develop a Progressive Plan, by considering the following elements:

- Evaluate the economic, social, and cultural conditions in a resource area

- Determine if a Progressive Plan is necessary, and

- Determine the conditions when Progressive Plans will apply.

NRCS's mission is to protect, restore, and improve soil, water, and other resources. NRCS accomplishes that mission by providing technical assistance to landusers to help them develop and implement a Resource Management System (RMS). NRCS only develops two types of conservation plans, Resource Management Systems (RMS) and Progressive Plans.

A Resource Management System is the combination of conservation practices and management identified by land users that, when installed, will prevent degradation and permit sustained use by meeting criteria established in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) for treatment of soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources. Each landuser will be offered a RMS option if one can be developed. Where an individual is unable to protect the resources to a RMS level of treatment at the present time, but may be able to achieve that level of protection in the future, NRCS will provide assistance to implement conservation treatments that achieve some of the resource problems. These treatments are considered a part of "progressive planning" towards n RMS.

A Progressive Plan is a combination of conservation practices and management that are part of an RMS Plan, that are feasible within the social, cultural, or economic constraints identified for the resource condition. Progressive Plans are designed to help accomplish societal goals yet avoid undue hardship on landusers in those instances where social, cultural, or economic conditions prevent the feasible achievement of an RMS.

Economics -

Where concerns have been raised about the economic feasibility of a candidate RMS, NRCS should evaluate the management system using the following questions:

A. What is the ability of the affected farm enterprise to pay for the candidate RMS?

- **Cost effectiveness - Are there acceptable relationships between the costs of the candidate RMS and the changes it brings about?**
- **Financial condition – Can the land user acquire funds to install and maintain the RMS without destroying the viability of normal farm operations?**
- **Markets - Are markets adequate and available for the affected farm enterprises products?**

B. Are inputs available to install and maintain a candidate RMS?

- **Input level - Are there adequate or sufficient management skills, land, labor and equipment present to operate and maintain the RMS?**

C. Is the RMS compatible with participation in government programs?

- **Cost sharing - Is cost sharing adequate and available for key practices within the RMS?**
- **Is eligibility for USDA programs maintained?**

Sociology -

Where concerns have been raised about the sociological implications of a candidate RMS, NRCS should evaluate that management system in accordance with the following criteria:

A. Public health and safety

- **Do local community standards regarding public health and safety require a conservation management system that is more stringent than a system required by other federal, tribal, state, or local regulations, guidelines or standards?**

B. Community characteristics

- **Traditional values - Is there conflict with social or religious values or societal goals?**
- **Risk tolerance/aversion - Is there opposition toward a practice, technique, equipment, or procedure in a candidate RMS because it threatens the viability of agricultural operations?**

C. Client characteristics

- **Age structure/planning horizon – Does the economic and social investment extend beyond a reasonable time frame for achieving a reasonable return?**
- **Limited resource farmer/rancher – Do farmers and ranchers lack adequate resources to install a candidate RMS (e.g., equipment, income, knowledge, or management capabilities)?**
- **Family values - Is there a conflict with traditional family values?**
- **Part-time farmers/ranchers - Is there insufficient time available to install, manage and maintain a candidate RMS?**
- **Tenure - Are owners or renters unavailable or unable to make decisions on the candidate RMS or is the system not in the interest of the owner or renter?**

D. Civil Rights Impact Analysis

Will there be any adverse impacts on program beneficiaries from socially and economically

- **disadvantaged groups, minorities, women, and persons with disabilities?**
- **Will there be any denial or reduced program benefits, or any form of discrimination against any possible clientele group?**

E. NEPA Environmental Justice

- **Have all stakeholders, including minority and low income individuals been provided the opportunity to comment before decisions are made which might impact them or their environment?**
- **To the extent possible, are all people allowed to share in the benefits of the NRCS conservation action?**
- **Is any individual or group affected in a disproportionately high and adverse manner by the NRCS action?**

Cultural Resources -

NRCS will identify and protect cultural resources, including Traditional Cultural Properties, early in the planning process. Resource Management Systems (RMS) will be developed in accordance with the cultural resource policies established in GM 420 Part 401, and other signed agreements with the State Historic Preservation Office and Tribes. Every candidate RMS will be evaluated for its potential to

adversely effect the characteristics of an object or site that make it culturally significant. It is NRCS policy to avoid any impact on significant cultural resources when possible.

When a candidate RMS is found to have an adverse effect on a cultural resource develop an alternative RMS that has a neutral or positive effect on the qualities of the cultural resource that make it significant. Consider actions that:

- **Cultivate or excavate no deeper that the present plow-zone**
- **Avoid the displacement or degradation of objects and features**
- **Stabilize the site through vegetative, structural, or use exclusion practices**

When it is not possible to develop a feasible alternative that completely avoids impacts to cultural resources develop options for mitigating potential adverse effects. Actions that may mitigate adverse effects include those that:

- **Stipulate archaeological monitoring during implementation**
- **Limit the degree or magnitude of actions and their implementation**
- **Minimize effects by realigning or relocating a proposed activity**
- **Rectify effects through repair, rehabilitation, or restoration of the affected cultural resource, Adhering to appropriate rehabilitation standards**
- **Reduce adverse effects over time by including in the RMS practices that will preserve and maintain the cultural resource**
- **Compensate for the effect by moving or documenting the cultural resource**

Since the appearance of cultural resources can never be predicted with certainty all implementation plans will include contingencies for the discovery of buried cultural resources.
